

Town of Amherst Human Rights Commission
Thursday, January 21, 2010

[Tasks to do and future projects are marked in italics.]

Present: Chairman Reynolds Winslow, Human Rights Director Eunice Torres, , Commissioner Kathleen Anderson, Commissioner Stefan Cejic, Commissioner Mohamed Elgadi, Commissioner Frank Gatti, Commissioner Daniel Lee, Commissioner Josiah Litant, Commissioner Victoria Oliva

Excused: Commissioner Lois Raj

Meeting commenced at 7:04pm.

I. Minutes Review

Motion to approve of the last meeting's minutes by Commissioner Anderson.
Commissioner Elgadi seconds. Motion approved.

II. Agenda

Review of today's agenda.

III. Old Business

Human Rights Director Torres confirms that everyone has completed the conflict of interest exam and submitted their certifications.

Commissioner Elgadi updates about Darfur. Students are back in the area for spring semester and are doing lots of good work. He says that students and others are continuing to organize and work on further initiatives. There was a meeting at his house last night, and students have lots of plans for action this spring, which we will be hearing more about. There is not currently an active group of students working on Darfur issues at ARHS. Commissioner Elgadi also talks about a recent bombing in Darfur and related protests as a result.

Commissioner Elgadi updates the committee about our ongoing conversation about blood donation and the disallowance of donations by gay men. **He said that two local nurses are willing to come and speak with the HRC about the issue further: Bea Emily and Charlene Marcham.**

Chairman Winslow shared information about the status of the fire chief search. The search has been completed and there will be an announcement soon. The names of two candidates had been advanced to the town manager and a decision has been made.

The installation ceremony, Chairman Winslow reports, for both police and fire chiefs, will take place in the spring, and all HRC members will be invited.

Commissioner Litant asks about the possibility of inviting the superintendent of schools, Alberto Rodriguez, to a future meeting as previously discussed. Eunice says that she and Commissioner Gatti will be meeting with Superintendent Rodriguez tomorrow and will invite him. She also tells us that the new police chief, Scott Livingstone, has offered to come and meet with the HRC as well.

IV. New Business

Discussion of the Heroes Group Award. Commissioner Gatti says that the purpose of his meeting with the superintendent tomorrow is to discuss the award, and to explain to him more about what the HRC does and about the award itself. Discussion ensues about some of the challenges in the past in getting enough nominations for the award. Commissioner Litant asks for some clarification about how the award works. Commissioner Gatti offers clarity that the award is from the HRC, and that many of the awards go to local school-age students, so the schools assist with nominations. Last year the first two “Elder Awards” were given as well. This is the seventh year of the awards. Chairman Winslow says we should start thinking about the advertising for nominations for the Elder Awards in addition to the “Young Heroes Award.” We will see what happens after the meeting with Superintendent Rodriguez tomorrow.

Chairman Winslow talks about an upcoming news article from HRC. Could some information about the latest work around Darfur as well as the Heroes Group Award be included? Everyone is in agreement. Chairman Winslow will start a draft. Commissioner Gatti, Commissioner Anderson and Commissioner Elgadi offer to contribute once the draft is begun.

Discussion of new initiatives and collaborations for Human Rights Day 2010—do we collaborate with Northampton, etc.? Commissioner Elgadi says if we can do better preparations in advance (i.e., starting now) then he thinks we should do a big, town-wide event here in Amherst. It has been a long-standing tradition to do the reading of the declaration of human rights outside, and it would be great to put a bigger event together around that. Commissioner Elgadi gives the example of Wole Soinka, who has been instrumental in much human rights work, and he wonders if we could build some event around a speaker such as him? He lives overseas but comes to a university in the area annually. Chairman Winslow suggests that this could potentially be a collaboration with one of the colleges as well. This year’s vigil will be December 10, and any indoor event would be on December 11.

Commissioner Gatti makes an announcement that Dr. Ruth Hook will be on WMUA, 91.1, on the 7th of February being interviewed. Chairman Winslow says that Dr. Hook will also be making an upcoming presentation at Grace Church—he will send out the information shortly.

Chairman Winslow asks the commissioners if we think we want to do anything relative to Haiti this year. He says that we could have an opportunity to spearhead a community effort. Commissioner Anderson says she thinks it is important to keep Haiti in the mind

of the community, as the media is eventually going to stop reporting on the efforts there, though the work will continue for years. Commissioner Litant suggests that this might be an excellent place for collaboration with the local colleges, and reiterates Commissioner Anderson's point, saying that it's critical that whatever we do focus on the history of Haiti and the challenges in the country beyond just this particular disaster. Commissioner Anderson suggests that some sort of community service trips to Haiti out of Amherst in the coming years (and it will be years, she adds) would be beneficial. Commissioner Anderson says she is willing to write something about Haiti for a future publication. Commissioner Gatti says we will have to see how things unfold to know how we can be most helpful, it is still perhaps too early to know how best to be effective.

Discussion about Black History Month in February, as well as our interest in doing something in honor of Martin Luther King. What about doing some sort of awards/recognition ceremony in the spring? It is discussed that whatever the town or HRC does to recognize Martin Luther King should really coincide with the MLK Breakfast—it would be a better use of resources. It is clarified that the MLK committee is a private committee, not a town committee. There is some discontent that the breakfast before the MLK ceremony was not videotaped, but it is hard for ACTV to send volunteers for these types of events. It is preferred that community members learn how to use their equipment so we can film our own local events.

Commissioner Litant asks if he is correct that the MLK Committee was previously approached about collaborating with us. Chairman Winslow says that the committee would accept an initiative to collaborate, he believes. Attendance has greatly decreased in recent years and perhaps we could be of help in advertising and supporting the event. Discussion happens about the venue, timing, food, program, etc. Commissioner Litant suggests that some of these things—with the exception of the program itself—may be deterrents to people attending the event. **It is clear that there is enthusiasm among the HRC to support this event, and the HRC would like to invite the MLK Breakfast committee to a future meeting to discuss the possibility of a collaboration.**

Brief discussion about the CCEBMS program at UMass, and recognizing the work of the leaders in this department. Chairman Winslow suggests that this could be another topic for a future newspaper article.

Commissioner Anderson notes that we have Black History Month noted on our agenda, but not any other such holidays or events of cultural or ethnic significance. Commissioner Litant suggests that we consider opportunities to take on collaborations with other local organizations to co-sponsor events around such holidays, months, or events. As we don't have many members, money, and only meet once a month, it is hard for us to organize our own events. Chairman Winslow says that we can certainly loan our time and energy to such initiatives.

It is asked if anything is happening at the high school in Black History Month. It is reported that there have not been any school assemblies this year as a result of budget cuts; it is unknown if anything will take place for Black History Month at ARHS. **There**

is discussion about the lack of recognition/celebration of Black History Month or other ethnic celebrations in the schools. This is an item that the HRC can be a strong advocate for, says Commissioner Litant, and many in the room feel that we should continue to push for more support for locally. This will be added to the list to discuss with Superintendent Rodriguez at a future time.

Chairman Winslow says that Dr. Sandy Muspratt, a physician, may be willing to bring a presentation to the HRC in the future about the situation in Haiti. Dr. Ruth Hook may also make a presentation on the situation in Gaza.

Chairman Winslow talks about his work putting together choirs for the MLK celebration this past weekend, and that he thinks that a chorale festival could be a powerful and enjoyable event, and could be a fundraiser for the HRC. Discussion of what this event could potentially look like. Discussion of “First Day on the Common” event, and if this could be something we could be a part of. It is an event at the start of school on the Amherst Common, and is free to attend. Chairman Winslow leaves the topic for now, he isn’t sure how to move forward on it yet.

Human Rights Director Torres says that there is money in the budget to have an HRC retreat, but that the money will expire on June 30. This would be a chance to bring a facilitator in and help us to further establish our agenda. This should go on the agenda for our next meeting to further discuss. Possible dates are April 24 or May 1, and those dates should be held for now.

Commissioner Gatti asks about follow-up to the presentation made to the HRC by Michael Berkhardt, about suspensions and other disciplinary action taken in the schools over the last 12 years in relation to student race and ethnicity. Chairman Winslow says that the Superintendent of Schools has spent time looking at the data and is now ready to take action and make some changes. There is also work in progress to formulate a social justice committee to make recommendations to the Superintendent as well.

Director’s Report

Director of Human Rights Torres announces that she has received and is working on a complaint of a human rights violation. This is all of the information that she can share at this time.

Announcements

- The David Ruggles Center, center for research for abolitionists, will be opening in Florence this spring.
- Enchanted Theater is presenting a free presentation of Sojourner Truth at the Academy of Music on 4/1/10 at 7pm.
- Chairman Winslow distributes a handout promoting the Norma Jean Anderson Civil Rights and Academic Achievement Award, organized by RaDar.

Concluding Statements

Next meeting will be February 18, 2010 at 7:00pm. Lois is nominated to take notes at the next meeting. Chairman Winslow motions to adjourn. Commissioner Lee seconds. Meeting adjourned at 9:02pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Josiah S. Litant